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Special Memo

12 December 1984

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Implications of P'yongyang's Initiative to Hold Tripartite Talks in Beijing

The North Korean proposal for tripartite talks in Beijing is an elaboration of its initiative a year ago to engage the US in direct contacts but shows greater flexibility. The North is serious about talking to the US and clearly is willing to cultivate the impression, if not the reality, of a greater Chinese role to achieve that breakthrough. P'yongyang may well have concluded that Beijing's indirect involvement is the price it must pay to attract Washington to the table.

The North Koreans seem to be attempting to counter one of the fundamental criticisms of its longstanding tripartite initiative -- that P'yongyang is trying to address the US over Seoul's head -- by affirming that the three sides would participate independently and on an equal footing. P'yongyang, recalling that the US withdrew its earlier tripartite proposal during Secretary Shultz's April visit to Seoul, has also been careful to spell out a role for the South in any preparatory discussions should these get under way.

- The North, however, has implied that it wants to conduct discussions without South Korean participation on the US-North Korean "problem" -- presumably a reference to transforming the armistice into a peace treaty, including the question of the US troop presence.

The South Koreans will criticize any such arrangements and regard them as part of the North Korean effort to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul.

- After only two sessions of renewed North-South dialogue -- and in light of the current postponement of further contacts -- the South Koreans are likely to see the North's offer as "too little too soon". President Chun obviously does not want to be portrayed as the recalcitrant party, but Seoul probably will argue that

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the US should stick to its position calling for P'yongyang to make progress on bilateral issues before tripartite talks begin.

- A Beijing venue for talks would have some appeal to Seoul because of its desire to expand dealings with the Chinese. But such contacts would still fall short of the returns Seoul will demand from the opening of any US-North Korean contacts. In our view, if Seoul were pushed by Washington to respond positively to the North Korean proposal, it would likely counter with the demand that the US troop presence in South Korea be excluded from any discussions.

The Chinese role in P'yongyang's decision to offer its tripartite proposal is unclear, but Beijing obviously used Kim Il-song's trip to China late last month to urge him to be flexible. Beyond the issue of venue, China does not want to come to the table. We believe it is deferring to North Korean desires to gain progress in its effort to engage the US.

Although many Japanese would welcome the talks, Prime Minister Nakasone is unlikely to argue against or take steps that would complicate a US refusal to participate. Tokyo, however, does not want to find itself left behind in any US move toward official contacts with the North. If the tripartite talks go forward, the Japanese would be likely to position themselves quickly to add a more prominent official cast to their currently limited trade ties with P'yongyang.

The Soviets, who wish to be included in any serious discussions on the future of the peninsula, almost certainly would be troubled by their exclusion from talks involving some role for China but not the USSR. They probably will view such a development -- coming on the heels of Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa's recent trip to P'yongyang -- as another example of Sino-US collusion at their expense. P'yongyang's moves over the past ten months to improve Soviet-North Korean ties may have been aimed, in part, at forestalling a negative reaction by Moscow, although it is unclear whether the North ever raised this elaboration of its initiative with the Soviets.

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